

## **Improving the National Response to Catastrophic Disaster**

Statement before the Committee on Government Reform

House of Representatives

By

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Mr. Chairman and other distinguished Members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the lessons of the national response to Hurricane Katrina, the role of local communities in preparing for such disasters, and the role of the government.

President Bush was absolutely correct when he labeled the national response “inadequate.” When national catastrophes occur, the resources of the nation have to be mobilized to respond immediately. And equally important, Americans must remain confident that their leaders, at all levels of government, are in charge and doing the right things to make all Americans safer. On both counts, the nation fell short and Americans have a right to understand why and what can be done better.

In my testimony, first I would like to discuss the key considerations that should shape the effort to learn from this tragedy. Second, I will assess the current efforts of communities across the nation to respond to similar challenges. Third, I would like to address the role of the federal government in assisting state and local governments in preparing for catastrophic disasters. Fourth, and finally, I would like to recommend actions that Congress should undertake.

### **The Disaster in Context—Scope and Character**

In evaluating the response to Katrina and the understanding the lessons to be learned for enhancing national preparedness, assessments must take into account the scope and character of the disaster.

#### *Scope of Tragedy*

Hurricane Katrina is the largest physical disaster this nation has suffered in modern history. There is no other event which could be used as a standard for measuring the efficacy of the response. For example, the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center was narrow in the geographic scope and centered on a single jurisdiction. Damage to infrastructure was localized and the immediately affected population ranged in the tens-of-thousands. In contrast, Katrina affected an area over 90,000 square miles, disrupted the lives of millions and destroyed or degraded most of the region’s infrastructure. The scope of the disaster represented an unprecedented challenge to emergency responders. As one veteran responder put it, the challenge of getting massive aid into flooded New Orleans and other devastated areas was a logistical problem like “landing an army at Normandy with a little less shooting.” Transportation networks, power, and communications, all the things essential to speeding aid were wiped out.

Some observers remarked that the Gulf Coast looked like a third-world disaster. And they were right. The storm surge, wind, and flood washed away everything that makes a modern city and left a mass of desperation, difficult to get to. Any assessment of the response must be realistic in its expectations of how quickly the dire needs of a million

people over tens-of-thousands of square miles of devastated terrain could be addressed under these impossible conditions.

### *Character of Catastrophic Disaster*

Katrina was also a different kind of disaster. In “normal” disasters, whether they are terrorist strikes like 9/11 or a natural disaster such as a flood or snow storm, a tiered-response is employed. Local leaders turn to state resources when they are exhausted. In turn, states turn to Washington when their means are exceeded. Both local and state leaders play a critical role in effectively communicating their requirements to federal officials and managing the response. In most disasters local resources handle things in the first hours and days until national resources can be requested, marshaled, and rushed to the scene. That usually takes days. With the exception of a few federal assets such as Coast Guard and Urban Search and Rescue, teams don’t roll in until well after the response is well under way.

In contrast, Katrina was a “catastrophic” disaster. In catastrophic disasters, tens-or-hundreds of thousands of lives are immediately at risk. State and local resources may well be exhausted from the onset and government leaders unable to determine or communicate their priority needs. And unlike New York after 9/11 there were few place communities to turn for immediate help. Surrounding cities could quickly pitch in, over intact bridges, roads, and waterways. The small communities around cities like New Orleans, Biloxi, and Baton Rouge had little extra capacity before the storm. Now they have their own problems. National resources have to show-up in hours, not days in unprecedented amounts, regardless of the difficulties. That’s a very different requirement for mounting a national response to normal disasters.

### *Success and Failure*

Recognizing all the limitations of the national response in meeting the challenges of catastrophic disaster, it is equally important to focus on the incredible achievements of America’s responders. Several hundred thousand were successfully evacuated before the storm. If they not been, the death toll would have been unimaginable. Tens-of-thousands were rescued during and after the storm under harrowing conditions, including over 33,000 by the Department of Homeland Security’s U.S. Coast Guard. Tens-of-thousands more, including those at the Superdome and Convention Center, were evacuated before they succumbed to dehydration, hunger, exposure, or disease. Today, many hundreds-of-thousands are being safely quartered by communities around the country.

In comparison to the devastation reaped by the Tsunami in Southeast Asia, the U.S. capacity to save lives in a similar disaster proved unparalleled. This just didn’t happen. It resulted from the decisions of government leaders, volunteer groups, private sector initiatives, and the selfless actions of communities and individuals. All are vital components of a national response. All these efforts, the plans that guided them, and how they worked together, must be evaluated.

*Since 9/11*

Another point I would make in assessing how we move forward, is that Americans should realize that as a nation since 9/11 we have invested only a modicum of effort in preparing for catastrophic disaster.

The overwhelming effort at the federal level, as well as those in state and local governments has been on strengthening our ability to respond to “normal” disasters. In part, because that is the way Congress, states, and cities wanted it—all insisted that we made enhancing the nation’s capacity to respond to “normal” disasters the highest national priority. The federal government was required to dole out grants with scant regard to national priorities. Katrina shows the limitations of that approach. Today, all the fire stations in New Orleans lie under water, as does much of the equipment bought with federal dollars. Only a national system—capable of mustering the whole nation—can respond to catastrophic disasters.

*What Does Katrina Tell Us?*

The final point I would make in putting Hurricane Katrina in context is that this tragedy leaves little question that we need a greater national capacity to respond to catastrophic disasters. Katrina provides a standard for the capabilities that must be on hand, for both catastrophic terrorist attacks and disasters. After all, there was little difference the effects of nuclear attack and the aftermath of Katrina other than the absence of mushroom cloud and radiation.

I would make one caveat to this conclusion – that in at least one respect Katrina does not give a fair appreciation for what is needed to respond to catastrophic disaster. In the area of catastrophic response, few issues require more attention than public health and safety. Ironically, one area that has not received “catastrophic stress” in the aftermath of Katrina is medical response. The lives of hundreds-of-thousands were saved by the actions of responders before and after the storm. Next time the nation might not be so lucky.

### **Local Efforts—Thinking About the Unthinkable**

Assessing how states and local communities are preparing to meet the challenges of catastrophic disasters is no easy task. I have long observed, “if you have seen what one city or state are doing about emergency preparedness and response, you have seen what one city or state are doing about emergency preparedness and response.” In part, the diversity is understandable. Communities have different needs, conditions, and requirements and they should have the flexibility to shape their preparedness and emergency response programs to best meet their concerns. There are, however, some national trends worth pointing out. Four are of particular importance.

### *All-Hazards Response*

The approach of most communities to disaster planning is “all-hazards.” In other words, they have a single response system which can be adapted to meet a variety of natural and manmade disasters. Indeed, I would argue that preponderance of emergency preparedness efforts at the local, state, and federal level have focused on building an all-hazards response and have not been diverted to just preparing for terrorist attacks. I think that approach is correct and should remain so in the future.

### *A Federalist Approach*

State and local governments assume in virtually every instance, state and local leaders will remain in charge and national assets, whether they come from other states, the private sector, or the federal government, will be in support of their efforts. That is the right approach, even for catastrophic disasters. Even if the federal government thought it would be prudent to usurp the authority of the state and local governments in the early hours or days of a disaster, it is doubtful that such an effort would improve the efficiency of the response. In fact, the response might be even more confused and chaotic.

Unity of effort can be achieved and maintained under the federalist approach, even in catastrophic disasters, as long as state and local governments are still functioning. The continuity of state and local government under catastrophic conditions, however, is an area of concern. Not all cities have alternate and mobile command posts, or adequate plans for maintaining continuity of government in the substantial loss of infrastructure during a catastrophic event.

### *Stress Test*

Most communities only invest a modicum of effort in assessing their capacity to execute response plans in the face of catastrophic disaster. In part, that is understandable. They have limited time and resources. Honing their capacity to meet every day emergencies, the kind that occurs day in and day out, is their priority. Additionally, officials are reluctant undertake exercises that begin with the presumption that at the outset of crisis they lack the capacity to address the needs of their citizens or take initiative. Additionally, stockpiling assets for catastrophic disasters is extremely expensive. In any event, this might be of little use since these resources themselves might be destroyed in the catastrophe.

There are, however, common sense measures that all communities can take. The vital capacity that many communities lack is the means to assess the adequacy of their emergency response plans to meet catastrophic disaster before, during, and immediately after an event and communicate that information effectively to state and federal officials so that their needs can be anticipated, rather than having the federal and state government wait for formal assessments and requests before they marshal resources to respond.

### *Lack of Community-Based Planning*

Most emergency response planning and preparedness activities at the state and local level is “top-down” rather than bottom-up. One indisputable fact should be the foundation of any public preparedness program: America does not have a culture of preparedness. There are simple measures that, if undertaken by individuals and communities, could limit the threat to people and property in the event of a disaster. Most Americans are oblivious to them and of the plans that their state and local officials have in mind for them.

Ironically, research suggests that the most effective preparedness response plans are those based on community-input. These plans can only be developed by engaging with communities, not just “leaders,” but individual citizens.

### *Washington's Place*

The worst lesson that could be learned from the disaster of Hurricane Katrina is that all the answers to addressing the needs of American in the face of catastrophic disaster are to be found in Washington. The federal government does have a unique and important role to play. Only the federal government can build a national response system, the kind needed in a catastrophic disaster to mobilize the resources of the nation in the face of a disaster that immediately overwhelms local leaders and puts tens-of-thousands of lives at risk. The federal government also has the responsibility to build the “plugs” that allow state and local government to “plug” into the system. This includes (1) training, (2) education, (3) planning, (4) interoperable communications, and (5) effective information-sharing. Beyond that, the federal government should focus federal dollars on building-up the federal assets needed to respond to catastrophic disasters.

### **Improving the National Response**

The administration and the Congress must better coordinate, integrate, and focus federal efforts on developing the unique competencies needed to meet catastrophic disasters. To assist in this effort, Congress should:

#### *Restructure the Homeland Security Grant System*

The administration needs the authority and organization to build an effective national response system.<sup>1</sup>

- Pass HR 1544 The Faster and Smarter Funding First Responders Act. A similar measure should be applied to grants by the Department of Health and Human Services.

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<sup>1</sup> James Jay Carafano and Alane Kochems “The First Responder Act: Congress Needs to Act,” May 8, 2005 (Heritage WebMemo #742).

- Ensure that the Department of Homeland Security must fully implement Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8.
- Insist that the Catastrophic Disaster Annex to the National Response Plan must be quickly implemented.

### *Reorganize the National Guard*

Most disasters, including terrorist attacks, can be handled by emergency responders. Only catastrophic disasters—events that overwhelm the capacity of state and local governments—require a large-scale military response. Assigning this mission to the military makes sense. It would be counterproductive and ruinously expensive for other federal agencies, local governments, or the private sector to maintain the excess capacity and resources needed for immediate catastrophic response. On the other hand, maintaining this capacity would have real utility for the military. The Pentagon could use response forces for tasks directly related to its primary warfighting jobs—such as theater support to civilian governments during a conflict, counterinsurgency missions, and postwar occupation—as well as homeland security. Furthermore, using military forces for catastrophic response would be in accordance with constitutional principles and would not require changing existing laws. These forces would mostly be National Guard soldiers, which are the troops that have the flexibility to work equally well under state or federal control. The force needs to be large enough to maintain some units on active duty at all times for rapid response and sufficient to support missions at home and abroad. For catastrophic response, three components would need to be particularly robust: medical, security, and critical infrastructure response.<sup>2</sup>

- Require the Defense Department to restructure a significant portion of the National Guard into an effective response force.
- Demand the Defense Department’s Quadrennial Defense Review, in coordination with the Department of Homeland security, be used to determine the precise number of the forces that are required and how they can be established by converting the existing Cold War force structure into units that are appropriate for new missions overseas and at home.

### *The Role of the State Defense Forces*

State and local governments will always need to draw support beyond their core of professional emergency responders for a catastrophic disaster.<sup>3</sup> While the National Guard is often the source of this support, it may not be enough. In addition, if the National

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<sup>2</sup> James Jay Carafano, “Foreign Disasters: Lessons for the Pentagon’s Homeland Security Efforts,” August 29, 2005 (Executive Memorandum #979).

<sup>3</sup> John R. Brinkerhoff, “Who Will Help the Emergency Responders?” June 2, 2005 (Heritage Lecture #882).



Guard is deployed the state must have a credible alternative. The Constitution authorizes the states to form other guards and militias. Some states have these volunteer groups. They are of varying quality and utility. These volunteer groups could be useful backup asset for catastrophic disaster. I do not recommend federal funding for state guards, but I do think the federal government should set national standards and provide incentives to states to address the readiness of their volunteer defense forces.<sup>4</sup>

- Require the Department of Defense, in cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security, to draft national performance standards for state volunteer defense forces.
- Authorize federal departments to advise and evaluate these forces and allow state defense personnel to undertake military and homeland security training and education opportunities at the state's expense.

#### *Follow Through on the Reorganization of the Homeland Security Department*

An independent review chaired by The Heritage Foundation and the Center for Strategic and International Studies argued that this structure was not suitable for leading the nation in preparing or responding to catastrophic disasters.<sup>5</sup> It recommended consolidating preparedness activities under an Under Secretary and creating a true “one-stop” shop for preparedness activities for state and local governments, as well as strengthening FEMA and making it an independent agency of the department, eliminating a level of bureaucracy and focusing the agency squarely on its traditional role of planning and coordinating the national (not just federal) response to disasters. In July 2005, the new Homeland Security Secretary announced the results of his “Second Stage Review” of the department's organization and missions. He proposed reforms that would have addressed these issues. Hurricane Katrina struck before his reforms could be fully implemented.

- Support full-implementation of the Chertoff's Second Stage Review.
- Require preparedness activities to be consolidated under an undersecretary.
- Insist FEMA be an independent operating agency focused on national response.
- Insist FEMA remain part of the department to ensure that response efforts are well integrated with all the critical missions supporting protection of the homeland.

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur N. Tulak, et al., “State Defense Forces and Homeland Security, *Parameters* (Winter 2003-04), pp. 132-46.

<sup>5</sup> James Jay Carafano, and David Heyman “DHS 2.0: Rethinking the Department of Homeland Security,” December 13, 2004 (Special Report #02), pp. 16-17.

### *Establish a Regional Structure*

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 required the DHS to propose a regional framework but provided no guidance on how to implement the system or its purpose. It states only that: Not later than one year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the [DHS] Secretary shall develop and submit to Congress a plan for consolidating and co-locating—(1) any regional offices or field offices of agencies that are transferred to the Department under this Act, if such officers are located in the same municipality; and (2) portions of regional and field offices of other Federal agencies, to the extent such offices perform functions that are transferred to the Secretary under this Act. The department failed to meet the time line and has yet to announce a plan for a regional framework. This organization could have significantly contributed to improving coordination for catastrophic disasters.<sup>6</sup>

- Demand Homeland Security create a regional framework with the primary aims of enhancing information sharing and other coordination among the states, the private sector, and the headquarters in Washington.
- Require that the offices be led by political appointees who enjoy sufficient clout to gain ready access to local leaders. Ideally, these individuals would include former politicians, police chiefs, and other people who have some background in both homeland security issues and their geographic areas of responsibility.
- Require the first priority of this regional organization should be to support the flow of information and coordinate training, exercises, and professional development for state and local governments and the private sector in responding to catastrophic disaster.

### *Build a “Culture of Preparedness” and Personal and Community Responsibility*

In comparison to the devastation reaped by the Tsunami in Southeast Asia, the U.S. capacity to save lives in the aftermath of Katrina proved unparalleled. This just didn't happen. It resulted from the decisions of government leaders, volunteer groups, private sector initiatives, and the selfless actions of communities and individuals. All are vital components of a national response. Yet more could have been saved in individuals and communities had met their basic civic responsibilities. America does not have a culture of preparedness. The Department of Homeland Security's current approach to enhancing public preparedness is deeply flawed. Instead of trying to run an ineffective advertising campaign from Washington, the department needs to refocus its programs to empower state and local governments to create effective “bottom-up” preparedness from individuals and communities. Initiatives like Ready.gov and National Preparedness Month are redundant with programs run by the American Red Cross and will never be as

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin Meese III, James Jay Carafano, and Richard Weitz, “Organizing for Victory: Proposals for Building a Regional Homeland Security Structure,” January 21, 2005 (Heritage Backgrounder #1817).

effective programs run by communities with the participation and leadership of local citizens.<sup>7</sup>

While the federal government's role in public preparedness should not be large, it should be effective and well-integrated with all the other preparedness, mitigation, and outreach activities. This can best be done by consolidating all of the Homeland Security Department's tasks under one place in the department, as recommended in "DHS 2.0: Rethinking the Department of Homeland Security."

- Insist that the department help state and local communities develop a culture of preparedness by helping them to establish training programs for state and local leaders. The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program was an attempt to do this.

#### *Educate Our Leaders*

There is no adequate national program to educate and exercise state and local leaders in how to prepare for catastrophic disasters. The DHS lacks an institution to serve as a focus for professional development of its leaders and a forum for educating other leaders in other agencies and other countries, similar to the Defense Department's War Colleges and National Defense University.

- Require a Homeland Security University.
- Require the University, in cooperation with the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security to create an exportable education program for governors and mayors of major metropolitan areas and their staffs for dealing with catastrophic disaster.
- Require TOPOFF exercises only once every four years, in the second year of a presidential term. This will allow more time to incorporate lessons learned and shift more resources into more frequent regional exercises.
- Insist on a joint NORTHCOM/FEMA exercise program.

#### *Build a Knowledge Network for Evaluating Response Plans*

Through the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) in Oklahoma City, the Department of Homeland Security has developed an effective knowledge network that provides lessons learned and assess technology needs for state and local governments. This system could be expanded to provide technologies for allowing state and local governments to conduct self-assessments of response plans including metrics, measurement, operations analysis, and best practices.

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<sup>7</sup> James Jay Carafano, "Beyond Duct Tape: The Federal Government's Role in Public Preparedness" June 3, 2005 (Heritage Executive Memorandum #971).

- Require the Department of Homeland Security to provide analytical self-assessment tools for state governments.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

These measures are steps that can be taken right now to shift the federal government toward building the right national response system for the nation. I urge the Congress to make them a priority. I look forward to discussing these other recommendations during the course of the hearing.

Once again, thank you, Mr. Chairman and the rest of the Committee for holding this hearing and for inviting me to participate. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.